

Cathy's Story



Avid cyclist Cathy was riding her bike on a beautiful spring morning when the heart monitor she wore while exercising started beeping like crazy. Her heart rate had jumped to 220 beats per minute. She thought her heart monitor was bad. Cathy's husband and cycling partner Robert insisted on taking her to the minor emergency clinic. "He wouldn't take 'no' for an answer," said Cathy, 37. "I kept thinking, 'how can I get out of this?'"

At the clinic, it became clear that the problem was more serious than Cathy had thought. "I hadn't felt any major symptoms – maybe just a little shortness of breath, a little tightness in the chest. I was riding my bike, for goodness sake!" Cathy was taken to the hospital by ambulance, but she still wasn't scared. "I thought they were being overly cautious and that I would be home in time to watch 'Desperate Housewives.'"

But Cathy was in ventricular tachycardia (v-tach), a condition in which the heart's pumping chambers beat too fast. In the emergency room, she was given drugs to slow her heart rate. That's when the pain started. "The first drug felt like someone had put a 100-pound weight on my chest," Cathy said. "When the first dosage had no effect, they doubled it – to no avail. My heart kept beating at 220 beats per minute. Finally, they decided that they needed to shock me out of the bad rhythm."

Still, Cathy wasn't afraid. "I had no idea how serious it was. I had been healthy all my life." After Cathy was stabilized, doctors found she has an unexplained case of cardiomyopathy. This rare but serious disease causes the heart muscle to become inflamed and not work as well as it should – and it caused the v-tach. Cathy would need a dual defibrillator and pacemaker implanted in her chest. "I got a little scared and started to cry. When I realized my life was going to change, I had a little pity party."

Long ago, Cathy had already made changes for the better. She'd grown up in a Catholic Hispanic family, with four brothers and four sisters. "My oldest sister nicknamed me 'baby hippo.' I was pleasantly plump." The family's meals were delicious, Cathy said, but not the healthiest. The "ultimate" tomboy, Cathy climbed trees with her brothers, fished with her dad and played kickball and basketball with her friends. In college, she played intramural volleyball, basketball and softball. Her love of sports and physical activity continued as an adult. She also enjoyed a heart-healthy diet.

Yet here she was, needing major surgery and a device to regulate her heartbeat for the rest of her life. "I ate right and exercised, and I didn't abuse drugs or alcohol. But maybe if I hadn't done those things, my body may not have been strong enough to withstand all that I had been through."

She was in the hospital for 10 days. "I had never been so miserable in my life. I couldn't keep anything down and I hurt something awful. I ended up dehydrated and they had to keep me at the hospital for an extra 24 hours." The device implanted in her chest at first caused pain and made sleep difficult.

During her recovery, it became important to Cathy to connect with other women sharing similar life-changing experiences. She found the American Heart Association's Go Red For Women Web site, where she was drawn to the women she read about. "It's like having your own family. When you're challenged by similar circumstances, you can come together and talk about it. I believe that our attitude is at the heart of our challenge."

Little by little, Cathy has tried to resume her active physical life, but she has trouble keeping up on bike rides to favorite spots with her husband – through downtown Houston and their favorite park. "I believe my cardiovascular system is out of shape. When I try to increase my speed, my heart rate jumps up. My husband can clip along at about 18 to 22 mph, so moving at 13 to 14 mph isn't much fun for either of us."

Even though their bike rides have slowed down, their relationship has improved. Love and laughter have become a big part of Cathy's life and marriage. "Now we call each other up to say 'how are you doing? I love you.' We have fun. We don't take each other so seriously; we poke fun at our idiosyncrasies. Our relationship has gotten a lot stronger."



Cathy - Houston, TX

Age: 39

Age at time of event: 37

www.GoRedForWomen.org